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SUBJECT: EVOLVING POLITICAL DYNAMIC IN NIGERIA

REF: ABUJA 69

CLASSIFIED BY: Dundas C. McCullough, Deputy Chief of Mission; REASON:
1.4(D)

11. (S) Since we sent you our scene-setter on January 21 (reftel),
several key political trends in Nigeria have assumed sharper focus:

Bandwagon Picking Up Speed

Newspaper publishers, north-south "Eminent Elders," the northern
Arewa Consultative Forum, professional organizations like the
Nigerian Bar Association, and labor unions - these are some of the
theoretically apolitical groups that have recently joined the
chorus demanding that Vice President Jonathan be accorded formal
presidential powers. The "Eminent Elders" include not just the
predictable opposition figures like General Buhari, but a striking
array of civilian and military leaders who have served or shaped
Nigerian governments for the past 50 years. The emergence of
Senate President David Mark in this chorus is significant, given
his close ties to Yar'Adua and his obvious political aspirations
post-Yar'Adua. The Yar'Adua clique's stout resistance against any
formal transfer of powers means the issue is no longer viewed as
just a technical procedural matter, as it might have been in early
December, but has become shorthand for distinguishing the Yar'Adua
diehards from those who want him to step aside. This bandwagon
will reach critical mass if sitting ministers or Federal Executive
Council members start to climb aboard.

Hanging on to Denial

The tiny Yar'Adua clique probably knows better than anyone else in
Nigeria the true extent of Yar'Adua's illness, although many
Nigerians suspect the worst. Yet, they are still determined to
insist that Yar'Adua's absence is temporary and the political
situation is otherwise normal. In the process of perpetuating this
charade, they have lost virtually all credibility as reporters on
Yar'Adua's condition or as stewards of the national interest.
First Lady Turai Yar'Adua has been pilloried by local media as the
alleged ringleader of this self-obsessed clique. There are reports
that the clique may agree to "medical leave" for Yar'Adua as
called for by a non-binding Senate resolution; if this came to

pass, it should relieve some of the political pressure by enhancing Jonathan's formal prerogatives.

Lack of Urgency

There remains a sometimes startling lack of popular urgency for resolving the political crisis, in stark contrast to the pressure that led to the defeat of Obasanjo's third-term initiative in 2006. As reflected by its seemingly endless tolerance of bad governance and daily hardships like power shortages, the Nigerian populace's capacity to endure pain has often surprised foreign observers. Large demonstrations against the political status quo - not the desultory affairs we have seen thus far in Lagos and Abuja -- or evidence, as opposed to speculative fear, that the military is contemplating political action, would quickly generate a sense of urgency, at least for political elites. Until that point, however, the Nigerian talent for muddling through, combined with Jonathan's surprisingly effective leadership during the communal violence in Jos, will continue to undercut appeals for dramatic political action.

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Deathwatch

Many Nigerian politicians seem to have adopted a strategy of waiting for the situation to resolve itself through Yar'Adua's death.

12. (S) In sum, there is growing public pressure to break the constitutional logjam by giving Jonathan formal presidential powers, but while more and more Nigerians joining the bandwagon, few want to get ahead of it. The good news is that the Nigerian military continues to be on the sidelines, both as the result of its own calculations and because there appears to be no kingmaker trying to motivate or fund intervention. In addition, while still treading very cautiously, Jonathan's public image has benefitted by his starting out with such low expectations. His steady if extraordinarily cautious performance was energized by his forceful public leadership on Jos, which helped solidify the political consensus, even in the north, supporting Jonathan's constitutional position as presumptive president. The bad news, though, is that many political players on both sides of the Yar'Adua issue remain satisfied to hedge their bets for as long as possible. Since personal, not national, interest drives their calculations, many of them will not be jolted out of this approach unless they are touched or threatened by a major embarrassment or upheaval.
MCCULLOUGH